

COMMENTARY

I. FIRST VISION OF GOD'S PRESENCE: EZEKIEL'S COMMISSIONING (EZEKIEL 1—3)

EZEKIEL

1—3

BEHIND THE TEXT

The book of Ezekiel opens with the first of three major visions of the glory/presence (*kābôd*) of Yahweh (see chs 1—3; 8—11; 40—48). This opening visionary experience in chs 1—3 contains within it Ezekiel's commissioning as a prophet and forms one of the most complex and difficult sections in the book. While living among the exiles in Babylonia, Ezekiel witnesses a storm cloud arriving from the north, which reveals the likeness of four living creatures within it, each with four faces, four wings, human bodies, and calves' feet. Wheels within other wheels move in tandem below the creatures. Above the creatures is a domelike structure that separates them from an exalted throne upon which sits what appears to be a human figure clothed with fire. Ezekiel proclaims that this scene is "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (1:28), and chs 2—3 go on to place Yahweh's personal commissioning of Ezekiel within this visionary context.

Ezekiel's Wheel in Music and Art

The imagery and descriptions of Ezekiel's vision in ch 1 have inspired a number of works of art and music, including the traditional spiritual "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel," performed in different versions by a number of musicians, and artistic renderings by the English poet and painter William Blake (1757—1827). See Christopher Rowland, *"Wheels within Wheels": William Blake and the Ezekiel's Merkabah in Text and Image* (The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology; Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2007).

Because this vision and commissioning is characterized by a complex structure, moments of repetition, and parallels with passages elsewhere in the book, scholars often conclude that it developed out of a long process of editing and expansion by Ezekiel's later followers (see Zimmerli 1979, 124; but cf. Greenberg 1983, 42-59). The superscription in 1:1-3, for example, with its alternation between autobiographical and biographical comments, seems to reveal the fruits of such editing. The superscription as it now stands, however, provides three key pieces of background information for Ezekiel and his ministry: date, location, and vocation.

First, the opening verse of the book dates Ezekiel's initial commissioning vision to "the thirtieth year, in the fourth month on the fifth day." Subsequently, v 2 adds the chronological indicator of "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin." Based on the ancient Judean calendar, the fourth month (Tammuz) in v 1 and the fifth year of Jehoiachin's exile in v 2 would yield a likely date of July 31, 593 B.C. (Block 1997, 83). Although perhaps the result of a later editorial addition, the date reference in v 2 is likely meant to clarify the time indicated by v 1. The "thirtieth year" in v 1 remains mysterious, however, because no further specification is given. Most scholars view the date as a reference to Ezekiel's age at the time of his commissioning, a view suggested by the NIV's text note that proposes reading "my thirtieth year." The designation may also refer, perhaps simultaneously, to the thirtieth year since the religious reform undertaken in Judah by King Josiah, which began around 623 B.C. and focused on centralizing the worship of Yahweh in a cleansed Jerusalem temple (see 2 Kgs 22—23; Sweeney 2005, 129; Hayes and Hooker 1988, 86-88).

If the thirtieth year in Ezek 1:1 refers to Ezekiel's age at the time of his commissioning, the vision in ch 1 occurred during what would have been a significant transitional moment in the life of an ancient Judean priest like Ezekiel. According to the priestly regulations, the age of thirty marked the time at which Levitical priests began their official service in the Jerusalem temple (Num 4:3, 23, 30; cf. Num 8:23-25). Additionally, if Ezek 1:1 refers to Ezekiel's thirtieth year, then the date of his final vision in 40:1 corresponded

to his fiftieth year, the time at which Levites are mandated to retire from temple service (see Num 4:3; 8:25). Seen in this way, the moment identified as the beginning point of Ezekiel's ministry represented a turning point in his life that underscored his sense of displacement and no doubt exacerbated his experience of trauma. At the time when he should have moved to the highest levels of purity and service in the temple, he instead found himself among refugees in an impure, foreign land (Odell 2005, 16). Even so, precisely during the time when this displaced priest would have spent twenty years in service in the Jerusalem temple, Yahweh used him to live among and speak to Judean exiles in a desolate region of the Babylonian Empire.

The superscription's placement of Ezekiel's initial commissioning vision in 593 B.C. also coincides with significant political events in Jerusalem and alerts the reader to the theo-political dimensions of Ezekiel's message. Around this time, King Zedekiah, whom the Babylonians had placed on the throne in Jerusalem after the city's first capture in 597, convened a meeting of emissaries from the kingdoms of Moab, Ammon, Edom, Tyre, and Sidon, apparently to plot a rebellion against Babylonia (Jer 27—28). Such a rebellion failed to materialize, and Zedekiah was eventually brought to Babylon, likely to reaffirm his loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 51:59). Against this background, Ezekiel's use of King Jehoiachin, Zedekiah's predecessor, as the reference point for the dates given throughout the book has a certain rhetorical significance. In the face of a king back in Jerusalem who continued to engage in political activities that were outside of Yahweh's will, Ezekiel implicitly identified the exiled Jehoiachin as the true king of Judah, who was in exile as part of the outworking of a larger divine plan.

The second piece of background information provided by the book's superscription locates Ezekiel geographically "among the exiles" (v 1) and "by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians [lit., Chaldeans]" (v 3). These statements identify Ezekiel as one of the deportees taken from Jerusalem into exile to Babylonia after the first capture of Jerusalem just four years earlier in 597 B.C. and remind readers that his ministry to come will be shaped by and attempt to deal with the experiences of such dislocation. Although earlier generations of scholars suggested that this Babylonian setting for Ezekiel's ministry may be only a later editorial addition or that Ezekiel moved back and forth between Babylonia and Jerusalem, there is no significant reason to doubt that he received his commissioning and carried out his ministry among the Judean deportees.

The more specific location of Ezekiel and his community of exiled Judeans "by the Kebar River" refers to a canal located near the ancient city of Nippur. This city, which sat on the Euphrates River about twenty miles south

of Babylon, had played significant roles in previous wars between Assyria and Babylonia and, at times, represented a last Assyrian holdout against emerging Babylonian power (Block 1997, 84). Hence, in keeping with general Babylonian practice, Ezekiel and his fellow Judean deportees were apparently settled into one of the most war-torn areas of the empire, no doubt with the implicit goal of revitalizing the area for the sake of the imperial agenda.

The superscription's final piece of background information is given only in passing but provides, in this commentary's view, the most vital item for understanding Ezekiel's identity and the book's theological discourse. Verse 3 identifies Ezekiel as "the priest, the son of Buzi." Although the Hebrew is unclear as to whether "the priest" designates Ezekiel or his father, either case locates Ezekiel as a member of the priestly line in Jerusalem. As discussed earlier, the elements of priestly experience and the perspectives of priestly theology provide the dominant lens through which Ezekiel interprets his commissioning vision and undertakes his prophetic ministry.

The effort to understand the possible traditions and genres that stand behind the unusual imagery of Ezekiel's commissioning vision forms a final background consideration for chs 1—3. The imagery in ch 1 contains a mixture of elements known from biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources. Within the biblical literature, the vision's form and imagery bear resemblances to both OT "storm theophanies" and "throne theophanies." The OT storm theophany is a scene in which clouds, lightning, brightness, and thunder mark the manifestation of the presence of Yahweh (Odell 2005, 19; Zimmerli 1979, 119). In Ps 18, for example, smoke, fire, and clouds accompany Yahweh's manifestation, which occurs with flying creatures (see also Exod 15; Pss 29; 97; 104). Throne theophanies in the OT describe visionary manifestations of Yahweh's presence accompanied by a divine throne and creaturely attendants (see Isa 6). Such representations appear not only in biblical texts that depict Yahweh as riding on the clouds but also in various Ugaritic and Assyrian texts that portray deities as cloud riders or winged disks.

There are no exact parallels to the four-headed flying creatures described in Ezek 1 in either biblical or ancient Near Eastern sources, but there are numerous examples in Mesopotamian iconography and artwork of various winged human figures with animal heads (see Block 1997, 98). In such representations, the creatures often serve as pedestals for the images of gods and thus as indications of their exaltation (Greenberg 1983, 56). Ezekiel's vision may similarly serve to reaffirm the sovereignty of Israel's God by making such creatures attendants to Yahweh's throne.

Alongside elements of storm and throne theophanies, Ezekiel's vision depicts Yahweh's sovereignty by providing a look into the heavenly throne

room using imagery that reflects the decor and layout of Assyrian royal palaces known from throughout ancient history (Odell 2005, 21-22). Assyrian throne rooms were decorated with ornate carvings and representations of creatures, humans, thrones, etc. Additionally, just as Ezekiel reports first seeing only a “likeness” (*dēmût*; 1:28) of Yahweh’s glory, so the layout of Assyrian throne rooms was such that one entered to face initially a visual representation of the Assyrian king in a triumphant depiction before turning a ninety-degree angle to enter the actual presence of the king. In the same way that the features of these Assyrian palaces served to assert the power of the Assyrian king, Ezekiel’s use of this well-known royal layout functions rhetorically to enhance the depiction of Yahweh as the enthroned sovereign in the midst of a foreign land.

Ezekiel and the Early Christian Interpreters

Early Christian interpreters and patristic writers offered a variety of perspectives on Ezekiel’s opening vision that differ from those of modern biblical scholarship. Rather than focusing on questions of grammar and history, early Christian interpreters like Irenaeus explored the theological question of what this text says to the church about the triune God who was revealed in Jesus Christ. Because such interpreters operated with a conviction that the OT and NT formed a unity in Christ, they attempted to understand Ezekiel by using intertextual comparisons with other biblical passages. More importantly, they interpreted the Ezekiel texts with an eye toward how these scriptures illuminate the moral or virtuous life, as they are read by and practiced within the community of faith (see Christman 2005, 2-4).

Perhaps most important for highlighting Ezekiel’s priestly identity and theology, however, is the recognition that much of the imagery of the opening vision finds parallels in the OT’s priestly traditions concerning Yahweh’s glory/presence (*kābôd*) and the Jerusalem temple. Depictions of the divine presence at Sinai, for example, describe the *kābôd* of Yahweh in the midst of fire, cloud, and light (Exod 19; 24; 40). Note also the reference to the “pavement” (*rāqia*^c; cf. Ezek 1:22) under Yahweh’s feet in the priestly description of Exod 24:10. The radiant imagery of the creatures and throne can also be compared with depictions of the ark of Yahweh and its accompanying cherubim in the Jerusalem temple. In fact, Ezek 10:9-14 later identifies the four creatures from ch 1 with the cherubim in the temple (cf. Exod 25:17-22; 1 Kgs 6:23-28).

As noted above, instances of repetition and disjointedness that occur throughout the overall vision and commissioning in chs 1—3 have led some commentators to see these chapters as a composite of several originally distinct visions and encounters (e.g., Zimmerli 1979, 94). On balance, however, chs 1—3 stand as a unified composition (see Block 1997, 77). The apparent

break at 3:15, where the vision seemingly ends with Ezekiel being returned to the Kebar River, is only a pause for a seven-day period of seclusion. The vision immediately picks up again in 3:16, and the chronological reference (“At the end of seven days”) joins the subsequent commissioning of Ezekiel as a “watchman” (3:16-21) with his preceding commissioning as a prophet (2:1-7). As a whole, then, Ezekiel’s opening vision follows a ringlike structure, with the prophet’s ingesting of a scroll of “lament and mourning and woe” (2:10) at its center:

- A. Superscription (1:1-3)
- B. Visionary Context of Commissioning: Part 1 (1:4-28)
- C. Ezekiel’s Commissioning as a Prophet (2:1-7)
- D. Ingesting the Trauma of the People (2:8—3:15)
- C’. Ezekiel’s Commissioning as a Watchman (3:16-21)
- B’. Visionary Context of Commissioning: Part 2 (3:22-23)
- A’. Transition: Instructions for Symbolic Acts (3:24-27)

IN THE TEXT

A. Superscription(s) (1:1-3)

■ **1-3** Ezekiel’s commissioning vision in chs 1—3 opens with three verses that introduce the prophet and his situation and serve as a superscription for the book as a whole. When compared with the superscriptions of other prophetic books (cf. Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1), Ezek 1:1-3 is unusual. Rather than the typical third person report of an editor/compiler (e.g., “the word of the LORD that came to Hosea” [Hos 1:1]), Ezek 1:1 begins with the first person speech of Ezekiel himself. Abruptly, however, vv 2-3 switch to third person description. Since v 4 then returns to Ezekiel’s first person report to relate the vision of the divine throne, the third person description in vv 2-3 may represent a later addition, perhaps to clarify the unspecified reference to the **thirtieth year** in v 1.

Ezekiel’s first person speech in v 1 introduces the book’s characteristic autobiographical style. The name **Ezekiel** (v 2) occurs elsewhere in the book only in 24:24, and most passages are presented as the words of Yahweh in first person. Throughout the book, Ezekiel the prophet recedes behind an emphasis on divine speech and action. The opening three verses also introduce two characteristic phrases in the theological language of Ezekiel’s narrative world: **the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel**, and **the hand of the LORD was upon him** (v 3). Both phrases underscore Yahweh’s predominance in the book’s visions, acts, and oracles. The **hand of the LORD**, which also serves as the opening marker for the book’s other major visions (8:1; 37:1; 40:1), may be related to

the prophetic traditions of Elijah and Elisha, in which Yahweh's hand enables prophets to do extraordinary things. It characteristically brings Ezekiel into a supernatural, visionary experience of Yahweh's presence.

As noted above, the superscription provides the reader with three major pieces of background information: Ezekiel's date in the turbulent political period of 593 B.C., location among the exiles in the southwestern region of Babylonia, and vocation as a Zadokite priest-in-training, who, likely in this very year, should have assumed his priestly duties at the temple in Jerusalem (see Behind the Text). Verses 1-3 also prepare us for the first vision of Yahweh's presence in chs 1—3 with Ezekiel's statement, **the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God** (v 1). The first phrase (**the heavens were opened**) implies that Ezekiel was given the ability to see directly into the heavenly throne room (cf. Rev 4:1-2). Moreover, Ezekiel's opening statement labels the entire commissioning vision that follows in chs 1—3 as **visions of God** (*mar'ēôt 'ēlōhîm*). The Hebrew construction here is probably better understood as a general designation (*divine visions*), and the plural **visions** may be a plural of emphasis indicating a single, yet direct and defining encounter with the divine presence (Odell 2005, 13; Block 1997, 85; Greenberg 1983, 41).

B. Visionary Context of Commissioning: Part I (1:4-28)

■4 Ezekiel's vision of Yahweh's presence begins in v 4, and this vision provides the context for his commissioning as a prophet in chs 2—3. Often referred to as the "chariot" ("Merkabah" from the Hebrew) vision, Ezekiel's report describes the appearance among the exiles in Babylonia of a mobile divine throne, which is accompanied by heavenly attendants and upon which a representation of Yahweh's presence rests. The imagery contains a mixture of elements known from biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources, including OT "storm theophanies" and "throne theophanies," as well as ancient Mesopotamian iconography of various winged human figures with animal heads and the internal designs of Assyrian royal palaces (see Behind the Text). These elements combine to give a picture of sovereignty. In a historical context where Yahweh's people had been conquered and his own sovereignty as a deity was in question in the eyes of some, the text visually represents Yahweh as sitting enthroned as a king, even in the very place of the people's exile.

As a means of drawing the reader into this portrait of Yahweh's sovereignty, the vision in ch 1 steadily directs the reader's gaze upward from the creatures, who are described first and from bottom to top (vv 5-14), to the expanse over their heads (v 22), to the throne above the expanse (v 26), and finally to the kingly figure seated on the throne (vv 26-28).

■5-14 The vision begins with the appearance of a strong wind out of the north and a cloud of fire, within which stand **what looked like four living creatures** (v 5). The creatures, whose four faces combined human and animal features and accompanying multidimensional wheels (see vv 15-21), are representative of the bizarre and sometimes obscure imagery that characterizes the entire vision. The four heads of Ezekiel's creatures who accompany Yahweh's throne may represent the four lords of creation: the eagle as the lord of the air, the lion as the lord of the wild animals, the ox as the lord of the domesticated animals, and the human as the lord of all creation. The vision's imagery reaffirms Yahweh's sovereignty by depicting the most powerful beings of creation as mere attendants to his divine throne.

The Spirit in Ezekiel

In the context of Ezekiel's description of the four living creatures in 1:4-14, v 12 contains the book's first reference to the Spirit (*rūah*), an entity that will play a prominent role in several sections of the book. Here, the Spirit serves as an animating force that moves the creatures. It will play a similar role for Ezekiel in other passages (e.g., 1:20; 2:2; 3:24). Yet the *rūah* plays a variety of roles in the book, and it is difficult to discern how they relate to one another (cf. 1:4; 3:12, 14; 36:27; 37:1, 9, 14).

Along with the depiction of divine sovereignty through the creatures, there is a large amount of priestly and temple imagery spread throughout the vision (Sweeney 2005, 134). The **burnished bronze** in v 7, for example, resembles the imagery of the ark of the covenant overlaid with gold and later replaced with bronze (1 Kgs 14:25-28; 2 Kgs 18:14-16), while the **coals of fire** in Ezek 1:13 are similar to the burning incense altars in the tabernacle (Exod 30:1-10). Such parallels no doubt reflect Ezekiel's own priestly identity and frame of reference, but also make the point that the God who appears to Ezekiel in this foreign land is indeed Israel's own God whose presence is manifest in the Jerusalem temple.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature that runs throughout Ezekiel's description of his vision is the repeated use of indirect language. In describing virtually every element of the vision, the language and imagery remain opaque, never offering a direct or precise description of any entity but prefacing almost every reference with such words as "like," "as" (*ka'āšer*), "likeness" (*dēmūt*), and "appearance" (*marē'ēh*). Ezekiel describes only **what looked like** [*dēmūt*] **four living creatures** (v 5), something "like [*ka'āšer*] a wheel intersecting a wheel" (v 16), "what looked like [*dēmūt*] a throne" (v 26), etc. (for such language, see 1:5, 10, 13, 14, 16, 22, 24, 26, 27, 28). He seems unable to express things in their actual essence but only in relationship to analogous

concepts and entities (Block 1997, 90). Commentators often understand this indirect language as representing Ezekiel's sense of Yahweh's holiness; that is, he is reticent to describe or disclose fully the things he sees, for they are too holy (Darr 2001, 1109; cf. Odell 2005, 30). Yet, the recurring use of indirect descriptions may also relate to the dimensions of trauma that characterize the prophet and the book. Traumatic experiences, such as the destruction and deportation experienced by Ezekiel and his audience, are often "missed," or partially comprehended, and thus may be difficult to articulate fully or directly. Additionally, Ezekiel's own unexpected experience of seeing Yahweh's holiness in an unclean land may have added another traumatic element that generated his indirect language.

■ **15-21** Following the description of the creatures, vv 15-21, which are often seen as a later addition (e.g., Zimmerli 1979, 105; but cf. Darr 2001, 1116), break the steady upward movement of the vision's viewpoint in order to describe the wheels that accompany the four living creatures. One wheel, apparently with another wheel somehow inside and a rim **full of eyes** (v 18), accompanies each creature and moves the creature around much like the wheels of a chariot. It remains difficult to envision precisely what Ezekiel describes here, whether two wheels intersecting at right angles, concentric circles, or other combinations. The **eyes** in the rims of the wheels may be round semiprecious stones (Odell 2005, 28) or actual eyes that represent Yahweh's watchfulness over the earth (Greenberg 1983, 58). In any case, the description of chariot-like wheels accompanying the four living creatures is likely another example of priestly imagery, as it may reflect the furnishings of the Jerusalem temple that included wheeled cult stands with animal carvings on the sides (see 1 Kgs 7:27-37; Odell 2005, 28).

■ **22-28** With the description of **what looked like an expanse** (v 22) above the heads of the four creatures, vv 22-25 resume the upward movement of the reader's gaze. The Hebrew word for **expanse** (*rāqia'*) literally denotes a "glassy dome." The same word appears in Gen 1:6 as the item that God uses to separate the chaotic waters in creation. Here, the **expanse** seems to serve as a platform upon which the divine throne sits, yet it also provides a clear line of demarcation between the creatures who attend the throne and the Sovereign One who sits enthroned above their heads. As we follow Ezekiel's gaze above the heads of the four living creatures to the platform that they support, a focus on visual sights gives way to Ezekiel's description of sound (vv 24-25). A deafening sound accompanies the movement of the creatures and their throne-chariot: **like the roar of rushing waters, like the voice of the Almighty, like the tumult of an army** (v 24).

Suddenly, however, the deafening noise turns to silence, as the flying creatures come to a stop and fold their wings. In that moment of silence, Ezekiel hears a voice speak from above the glassy platform (v 25). Only now does he lift his eyes further and describe what is above the **expanse**. As expected, the language is indirect, even more so than previously: **what looked like** [*dēmût*] **a throne**, with one seated upon it who was a **figure** [*dēmût*; lit., **likeness**] **like that** [*kēmarē'eh*] **of a man** (v 26). Literally, the verse describes the sight as **the likeness of a throne** with one seated upon it who has the **likeness of the appearance of a man**. The figure has a shining radiance and is consumed in flames below the waist. Upon viewing this figure (lit., **likeness**) of a human, the final verse of the chapter (v 28) provides the long-awaited explanation of the sights that Ezekiel has been seeing. Ezekiel identifies the figure sitting on the throne high above the earth with the key term that represents the presence of Yahweh in the book but with language that is indirect in the extreme: **This was the appearance** [*marē'eh*] **of the likeness** [*dēmût*] **of the glory** [*kēbôd*] **of the LORD** (v 28). The priestly traditions within which Ezekiel stood envisioned the *kābôd* (“glory”) as the visible manifestation of Yahweh’s splendor or presence that dwells in the holy of holies as long as it remains undefiled by the pollution caused by human sin. This term (*kābôd*) appears around two hundred times in the OT and plays an especially prominent role as the representation of the presence of Yahweh among the people in the wilderness tabernacle (Exod 16; 29; 40). Against the backdrop of the priestly tradition, Ezek 1:28 declares that Ezekiel finds himself before the most direct manifestation of the presence of Israel’s God, even though he stands on the soil of a foreign land and in the wake of his own people’s defilement of the central dwelling place of Yahweh’s presence in the Jerusalem temple. Overwhelmed (and perhaps shocked) by the experience, Ezekiel’s only response is to fall prostrate.

New Testament and Early Christian Appropriations of Ezekiel’s Chariot Vision

The language and imagery of the vision in Ezek 1 appear in the writings and artwork of the early Christians in the NT and beyond. The portrayal of the heavenly throne in Rev 4:2-8, for example, draws on a number of OT visions, including Ezekiel’s, and contains about a dozen expressions taken directly from Ezek 1:1-27 (Block 1997, 110-11). The iconography of early Christians similarly identified Christ with the “appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” from Ezek 1:28 (Odell 2005, 33).

This opening vision in ch 1 not only provides the context for Ezekiel’s commissioning that follows (chs 2—3) but also holds powerful theological significance for the traumatized community of exiles who had suffered the dis-

mantling of their most precious religious conceptions. From Ezekiel's priestly perspective, Yahweh is inseparably linked to the Jerusalem temple in the land of Israel, a location to which this community of deportees has now lost all access. Yet here in the opening vision, the very *kābôd* of Yahweh thought to be restricted to the Jerusalem temple, appears free and mobile, even coming to be in the midst of a foreign, unclean land. By hearing the report of this vision, Ezekiel's traumatized community experiences the presence of Yahweh come to them in the midst of their exile. Additionally, the text implicitly signals Yahweh's abandonment of the rebellious people remaining in Judah under Zedekiah in favor of the exiles with whom Judah's future lies (see chs 8—11). Still, the opening vision is not just a statement of divine freedom and mobility; its imagery of elements of nature and all the classes of living creatures (see 1:1-5, 10) is ultimately a visual representation of Yahweh's sovereignty over the entire cosmos. In the end, for Ezekiel, this sovereignty of Yahweh turns out to be the sole source of hope that can provide an alternative plot line for Israel's future after exile.

C. Ezekiel's Commissioning as a Prophet (2:1-7)

The opening of ch 2 relates Yahweh's first actual words to Ezekiel in the book, forming a direct continuation of the final phrase of ch 1 ("and I heard the voice of one speaking" [v 28]). Out of the visionary context of the divine presence in ch 1, Yahweh speaks from the throne in 2:1-7 in order to commission Ezekiel as a prophet who will speak to the disobedient Israelites. The divine speech, which begins with the Spirit once again acting as an animating agent to lift Ezekiel to his feet (cf. 1:12; 3:12), has several elements of typical OT call scenes (e.g., the use of the verb "to send" [2:3-4]; the admonition not to be afraid [v 6]). Yet, in keeping with the heavy divine emphasis throughout the book and in contrast to many of the prophetic call narratives elsewhere, Ezekiel does not resist the call or offer a response of any kind (see Isa 6; 1 Kgs 22); the scene is dominated by Yahweh's words and actions.

■ 1-2 The first words of Yahweh to Ezekiel in v 1 introduce the primary designation used for the prophet throughout the book: **son of man** (Heb., *ben 'ādām*). The phrase occurs ninety-three times in the book. In the context of Ezekiel, the phrase should not be read as a title (contra NIV). The phrase appears as a title in the OT only in the book of Daniel (see Dan 7:13), where it designates a divine figure in the midst of human beings (Block 1997, 30). In referring to Ezekiel, it has the opposite function in this book. In the Hebrew idiom, to be a **son of man** is simply to be one of the species of human (see Num 23:19; see "son of Israel" for "Israelite"); hence, the NRSV translates correctly,

“mortal.” The repeated use of this designation for Ezekiel emphasizes his mortality and creaturehood in comparison to Yahweh, who is often designated with the double title “Sovereign LORD” (see 37:3) and has just been portrayed as the king of the cosmos in the opening vision of ch 1. Indeed, nearly every activity in the book is presented as the direct words and actions of Yahweh, while Ezekiel’s persona is virtually subsumed beneath this divine emphasis. This heightened acknowledgment of Yahweh’s sovereignty answered a sense of powerlessness among Ezekiel’s audience, created by the experiences of destruction and exile.

■ **3-7** Against this backdrop of Yahweh’s sovereignty, vv 3-5 provide the essence of Ezekiel’s call: **I am sending you . . . say to them . . . they will know.** Here at the outset (v 3) and throughout the book, Ezekiel uses the name *Israel* to refer to the exiles and other Judeans. Such a designation is surprising, as the name more strictly designates the northern kingdom with its capital in Samaria that was destroyed centuries earlier in 722 B.C. By using such a name, Ezekiel evokes the tradition of an ideal, unified kingdom living in proper relationship to Yahweh. Yet, the further description of *Israel* as a **rebellious nation** in v 3 is actually plural in the Hebrew text (“rebellious nations”). The reason for this plural designation remains debated. The reference may be to the multiple kingdoms that had allied with King Zedekiah of Judah to plot a rebellion against Babylonia at the time of Ezekiel’s call in 593 B.C. (see Behind the Text). Or, the reference may be a recognition of the fact that two Judean communities existed after the first deportation of 597 B.C., namely, the exiles in Babylonia, and Zedekiah and those remaining in the land of Judah. Alternatively, the plural “nations” may refer to the entire history of the peoples of Israel and Judah as a rebellion, joining with the second half of v 3 to extend Israel’s rebellion back to the entirety of its existence in the land: **they and their fathers have been in revolt against me to this very day** (note how 37:22 envisions a restoration of Israel and Judah as a single “nation”). Thus, Ezekiel begins already to renarrate the entire history of the people of Israel as a history of rebellion (see ch 20).

Verse 5 then introduces one of Ezekiel’s main titles for the people: **rebellious house** (*bêt mēri*; see also vv 6, 7, 8). Occurring fourteen times in the book, the title again recasts the entire history and character of Israel as one of rebellion. Moreover, the language has both religious and political resonances (Odell 2005, 43). The verb “to rebel” (*mārad*) is a common term in ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts for the rebellion of a vassal against a political overlord (e.g., Gen 14:4; 2 Kgs 18:7, 20). Such a reference is fitting, given King Zedekiah’s involvement in plans for rebellion against Babylonia at this time. Simultaneously, since Ezek 1 has established a vision of Yahweh as the en-

throned king of all creation, Ezekiel's designation depicts Israel as a rebellious vassal to the divine king (see 17:15) and virtually equates Zedekiah's budding rebellion against Babylonia with rebellion against Yahweh.

Given the proven rebelliousness of Israel, Yahweh attaches a special dimension to Ezekiel's call: he is to preach **whether they listen or fail to listen** (v 5). Ezekiel's successful fulfillment of his divine commission does not depend on the response of the people but only upon his own faithfulness to the task (see also 3:16-21; see Isa 6:9-13). Such preaching will, however, cause the people to **know** [or, *acknowledge*] **that a prophet has been among them** (v 5). Ezekiel's message will show those people who will soon experience divine judgment through the destruction and exile of 586 B.C. that Yahweh had provided them with warnings. In this way, the book of Ezekiel begins to address the trauma of those who have experienced and will experience destruction. While such destructions could be perceived as signs of the weakness and defeat of their God, Ezekiel's message renarrates them as part of Yahweh's own sovereign plan to restore the holiness of the people and land.

Ezekiel and the Call Experience

The stories of several prophets and other important leaders in the OT include accounts of their call experience. These "call narratives" typically take two forms: (1) a process of dialogue with Yahweh in which the prophet initially resists or refuses the divine call, or (2) a powerful experience of Yahweh's presence that overwhelms the prophet so that he or she offers no resistance to the divine charge. Most interpreters view Ezekiel's call as one of the second type, since he experiences an overwhelming vision of Yahweh's presence that leaves him with no room to resist (Zimmerli 1979, 99). More recently, however, other commentators have suggested that Ezekiel's call must be understood in light of the whole of chs 1—3 and that Ezekiel's actions of sitting silently, being bound, etc., indicate that he was resistant to the call (Block 1997, 78). In any case, the presence of more than one type of call in the OT texts reminds contemporary readers that their own call experiences may be of many different, even unpredictable types, and that calls often include an extended process of dialogue in which a person can raise questions and receive responses and assurances from God.

D. Ingesting the Trauma of the People (2:8—3:15)

■ **2:8—3:3** Between Ezekiel's commissioning as a *prophet* in 2:1-7 and his commissioning as a *watchman* that follows in 3:16-21, the strange scene of Yahweh giving Ezekiel a scroll to eat (2:8—3:15) stands at the center of the entire unit of chs 1—3. Ezekiel sees a scroll with writing on its front and back, eats the scroll, and discovers that it tastes as **sweet as honey** (3:3). The text

immediately alerts the reader to the magnitude of the scroll's contents, as scrolls in the ancient world normally have writing on only one side, while Ezekiel's scroll is overflowing with words on the front and back. In contrast with the obstinacy of the **rebellious house**, Ezekiel is to obey without resistance Yahweh's command to eat. In fact, the prophet remains passive throughout the encounter, as the verb in 3:2 (**he gave me the scroll to eat**) is a causative form in Hebrew, literally reading, *he fed me*.

The scene is similar to the call of Jeremiah, in which Yahweh claims to have placed his words in the prophet's mouth (Jer 1:9-10), as well as to a later passage, in which Jeremiah refers to eating words of suffering sent by Yahweh (Jer 15:16). For Jeremiah, however, the image remains only symbolic and metaphorical. Ezekiel literalizes the symbol, with Yahweh actually force-feeding him the scroll itself. The text seems to present this event only as part of the vision that Ezekiel is experiencing (see 2:9), but this kind of blurring of the line between vision and literal act is characteristic of Ezekiel's visionary reports throughout the book (Block 1997, 125).

Ezekiel's description of the words on the scroll labels them as **words of lament and mourning and woe** (2:10). Hence, most commentators take the scroll to contain the content of Ezekiel's prophetic message, that is, the words that he should speak to the Israelites (see Darr 2001, 1125). Others take the whole scene as simply a test of obedience that Yahweh gives to Ezekiel after his initial call in 2:1-7, not directly related to the actual content of his message (see Odell 2005, 44). The scroll's contents of **lament and mourning and woe**, however, more readily represent responses to a message rather than the message itself (see Zimmerli 1979, 135). Seen in this way, Yahweh gives Ezekiel a firsthand experience of the traumatic nature of the events that will befall the people of Israel and around which his preaching will revolve. Ezekiel ingests the trauma of the people into his own being. The prophet's assertion that the taste of such experiences was **sweet as honey** (3:3) does not attribute pleasantness to the people's trauma but likely resembles language found in the psalms that describes Yahweh's word as "sweeter than honey" (Pss 19:10; 119:103) and thereby indicates that the trauma to come upon the people is part of the divine word to Israel (Zimmerli 1979, 136).

In conjunction with the possibility that Ezekiel experienced his call at the very time in which he would have begun his service as a priest at the Jerusalem temple (see 1:1), the scene of ingesting the people's trauma at the midpoint of his call is similar to the ritual for the ordination of priests in Lev 8—9, where the priests eat the sin offering in order to take on the people's guilt and provide forgiveness for it. The priests identify with the people in their sin for the sake of Yahweh's larger purpose of forgiveness. Likewise, Eze-

kiel here identifies in a most personal way with the people's trauma for the larger purpose of speaking Yahweh's message to them.

■ **4-11** Following the eating of the scroll, Yahweh again commands Ezekiel to go and speak his words to the Israelites (3:4-11; see 2:1-7). Ironically, Yahweh tells Ezekiel that his own people will be less receptive to the divine message than a foreign people of **obscure speech and difficult language** (3:5; cf. the receptivity of the foreign sailors and Ninevites in the book of Jonah). Against the backdrop of the portrayal of Yahweh as a cosmic, sovereign ruler in ch 1, it is Yahweh's own people (subjects) who are the most unwilling to listen to him (Odell 2005, 45). The people's defiance has nothing to do with Ezekiel but results from the fact that they are **hardened and obstinate** (v 7) to Yahweh (see Yahweh's words to Samuel at the people's demand for a king in 1 Sam 8:7). Literally, Ezek 3:7 describes the people as having "a hard forehead and a stubborn heart" (so NRSV), thus depicting both an external and internal hardness. To meet the challenge of the people's hardness, however, Yahweh equips Ezekiel with a corresponding hardness, which even surpasses that of the people: **I will make your forehead like the hardest stone** (v 9).

Verses 4-11 also explicitly reiterate the central theme of the direct and dominant role played by Yahweh in Ezekiel's ministry. Ezekiel is repeatedly said to be speaking the very words of Yahweh and only when Yahweh opens the prophet's mouth to do so. This idea is implied here by Yahweh's force-feeding of the scroll and made explicit by Yahweh's statements that Ezekiel will **speak my words . . . all the words I speak to you** (vv 4, 10). As earlier in 2:7, Ezekiel is to speak these words to the people, regardless of **whether they listen or fail to listen** (v 11).

Yahweh's instructions in vv 4-11 also give a fuller picture of Ezekiel's audience. Upon reading the initial commissioning of 2:1-7, one might conclude that the sole focus of Ezekiel's message is the rebellious group that remains in the land of Judah under Zedekiah (see 2:3, 7). But the instructions in 3:11 link the exiles in Ezekiel's own Babylonian community to the "rebellious house" that was mentioned previously (see 2:6). Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to address the exiles with the same messenger formula (**This is what the Sovereign LORD says**) with which he is to address the group mentioned earlier (cf. 2:4; 3:11) and to preach to both groups in the same manner: **whether they listen or fail to listen** (3:11; see 2:7). The book as a whole maintains this tension, in which the exiles with Ezekiel in Babylonia are the focus of Yahweh's future plans for restoration but also bear some responsibility for what has happened to Judah. Even so, the prophet calls them to break with the old Israel through a return to faithfulness toward Yahweh.

■ **12-15** Following Yahweh's instructions (vv 4-11), vv 12-15 abruptly return to the imagery of the wheeled throne carried by the living creatures, thus reminding the reader what he or she has nearly forgotten, namely, that Ezekiel's commissioning takes place in the visionary context of the appearance of the glory of Yahweh at the Kebar River. As if startling Ezekiel (and the readers!) awake, the prophet hears the noise of wings and wheels as the chariot throne begins to move once again (cf. 1:24-25). Although one can read 3:12 as a doxology that praises the **glory of the LORD** (**May the glory of the LORD be praised in his dwelling place**), the Hebrew phrase is likely better read as a description of the rising of the glory from the place where it had come to rest before Ezekiel ("as the glory of the LORD rose from its place" [NRSV]; see Zimmerli 1979, 94). As the glory of Yahweh begins to move, the Spirit returns Ezekiel to the exiles in Tel Abib, although the text never indicated that he left them.

Upon his arrival back among the exiles, Ezekiel describes his reaction to the visionary experience in harsh terms: **I went in bitterness and in the anger of my spirit** (v 14). Moreover, following the initial call to be a prophet and the symbolic ingesting of the people's trauma, Ezekiel sits **overwhelmed** (v 15; "stunned" [NRSV]; lit., *desolate, devastated*) for a period of seven days. Some interpreters have taken this as a sign of Ezekiel's resistance to his call (Block 1997, 138, 141), while others say it represents his feelings of despair about his mission (Greenberg 1983, 90). It is perhaps better to see this momentary pause in Ezekiel's overall commissioning in chs 1—3 as reflecting the practices for the ordination of priests described in Lev 8—9 (Odell 2005, 47; Darr 2001, 1111). In the midst of the priestly ordination process, the priests being ordained have a seven-day period of seclusion in the sanctuary prior to the completion of their ordination in order to mark the transition from their former life to their future life (Lev 8:33-36). Whatever the interpretation, Ezekiel's silence and awe reemphasize the fact that Ezekiel will speak only when Yahweh opens his mouth and provides the words (see Ezek 3:10).

E. Ezekiel's Commissioning as a Watchman (3:16-21)

The story of Ezekiel's eating the scroll in 2:8—3:15 stands at the center of his commissioning vision in chs 1—3. Ezekiel receives a commission to be a prophet (2:1-7), ingests the trauma of the people, endures a seven-day interlude of desolation (2:8—3:15), and then proceeds to the remainder of his commissioning in 3:16-21. Some commentators suggest that the commissioning in these verses is a later addition to the text, as the designation of Ezekiel as a "watchman" appears in a developed form later in 33:1-9 (so Zimmerli 1979, 154). As in 2:1-7, Ezekiel again receives a call to speak Yahweh's

message to the house of Israel, and the text reiterates the book's consistent emphasis on divine initiative and activity, as Ezekiel will speak when he hears a word from Yahweh (3:17).

■ **16-21** Here, Yahweh specifically commissions Ezekiel to be a **watchman** (v 17) or “sentinel” (NRSV; Heb., *sōpeh*). In the ancient world, the **watchman** was a lookout who served to warn of an approaching enemy (see 2 Sam 13:34; 2 Kgs 9:17; Jer 6:17; Hos 9:8; Mic 7:4). Revisiting a theme of Ezekiel's commissioning as a prophet in 2:1-7, 3:18-21 elaborates on the demand that Ezekiel must be faithful to warn no matter the audience's response. It is up to the people, both the wicked and the righteous, to respond to the sentinel's warning; Ezekiel's only charge is to sound the warning. But these verses develop the importance of this charge in a far greater way than the commissioning in 2:1-7. So important is the sentinel's duty to speak the message of warning faithfully that Yahweh's speech in vv 18-21 makes Ezekiel's life dependent upon it. If Ezekiel fails to speak Yahweh's warning and the people remain in their wickedness or turn from their righteousness, Ezekiel himself will be held **accountable** for their blood (vv 18, 20). These divine instructions offer a lasting reflection on the seriousness of a divine call and the measure of its success. The success of such a call to service is not measured by the nature or amount of the people's response but by the servant's faithfulness in proclaiming the message. Even so, the faithful execution of the duty to which one is called is not a light matter of vocational choice but a life-or-death charge in which the servant is held responsible for the lives put into his or her care.

These divine instructions to Ezekiel have a legal style characterized by hypothetical scenarios, which reflects that of priestly legal texts in Leviticus (see Block 1997, 142). Here is another aspect of Ezekiel's priestly identity, that is, his charge to take on the primary role of teaching divine instruction (*tôrāh*), one of the main tasks of priests in the exile. Yet there remains a deep irony in this commissioning. The text does not state the identity of the enemy about whom Ezekiel, as a **watchman**, is to warn the people, but it implies that the same God who appoints the watchman is the very One who is coming against the people as an enemy in the destruction that will occur in 586 B.C. In fact, Yahweh's statement in v 17 to **give them warning from me** could be translated as a command to **give them warning against me** (see Darr 2001, 1134).

F. Visionary Context of Commissioning: Part 2 (3:22-23)

The traditional view of the structure of chs 1—3 sees 3:21 as the ending of the opening vision/commissioning and 3:22—5:5 as the next major section of the book that focuses on Ezekiel's symbolic acts (e.g., Sweeney 2005, 136-

37). In the same way that 1:4-28 provided the visionary context for Ezekiel's commissioning as a prophet in 2:1-7, however, 3:22-23 may be seen as a return to that visionary context following Ezekiel's commissioning as a watchman in 3:16-21 and preceding additional instructions given to him by Yahweh in 3:24-27 (see outline above). Verses 24-27 reveal the content of the vision in vv 22-23 and provide the transition to the beginning of Ezekiel's public demonstrations through symbolic acts (4:1—5:4).

■ **22-23** As at the beginning of the initial vision by the Kebar River (1:3), in 3:22 the **hand of the LORD** comes upon Ezekiel and causes him to move to the geographical location of a **plain**, presumably the flood plain beside the Kebar River where the first vision took place. In one simple descriptive sentence, Ezekiel relates that he once again encounters the glory/presence (*kābôd*) of Yahweh that had appeared to him at the first: **And the glory of the LORD was standing there, like the glory I had seen by the Kebar River** (v 23). Even though Ezekiel gives only an abbreviated summary statement of this encounter, he evokes the memory of the full vision of Yahweh's presence in ch 1 and imports all of that imagery into this scene (see Block 1997, 153). Just as before, the experience of the divine presence is overwhelming, and Ezekiel falls prostrate (see 1:28).

G. Transition: Instructions for Symbolic Acts (3:24-27)

3:22-27

Because vv 24-27 switch from Ezekiel's visionary and commissioning encounter with Yahweh to instructions for symbolic acts (see commentary on 4:1—5:4), some commentators see these verses as a later addition or the beginning of a new section of the book. Yet, these verses that appear to inaugurate the start of Ezekiel's public ministry remain inextricably connected to the preceding visionary encounter in 1:1—3:23. Verses 24-27 provide the content of what Yahweh says to Ezekiel when the glory/presence appears to him in the plain and simultaneously provides the bridge to the next chapter by relating the divine instructions for the first of Ezekiel's symbolic actions. As is characteristic of all the symbolic actions in the book, the text provides only the instructions for the act; no report of the action or the audience's response is given (see also the instructions in 4:1—5:4). Additionally, here and throughout the following section, Yahweh begins several sets of instructions with the book's common designation that emphasizes Ezekiel's mortality, **And you, son of man** (v 25; "mortal" [NRSV]; see also 4:1; 5:1).

■ **24-27** Similar to the transition from the initial vision to Yahweh's address to Ezekiel in 2:2, **the Spirit** in v 24 raises the prophet from his prostrate position to be addressed by the divine words. Yet, Yahweh's instructions to Ezekiel

in the plain are a strange way to begin a prophetic ministry. Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to seclude himself within his house. Moreover, the prophet will be bound with ropes to restrict his movement, and have his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth so that he cannot speak to the people about their sins. The interpretation of these symbolic acts hangs on the translation of the verses. It is unclear whether the verbal clause here is active (**you . . . they will tie with ropes**) or passive (“cords shall be placed on you” [NRSV]). The Hebrew verb form (from the root meaning, “to put, place”) can support either translation, and the Greek translation of the OT reads the verb as a passive. The majority of commentators take the verb as active (**they will tie**) and understand the verse as Yahweh’s prediction that Ezekiel’s audience will actively oppose his message and ministry (so Zimmerli 1979, 160; Greenberg 1983, 102). Yet, throughout the book, there are no reports of such resistance or hostile actions by Ezekiel’s audience. The exiles often seek Ezekiel’s guidance and make inquiries of him (e.g., 8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:30-33; see Block 1997, 155). Additionally, many of the prophet’s symbolic actions reflect the events and effects of warfare, destruction, and exile (e.g., 4:1-3, 9-17).

Seen in this light, the actions in 3:25-26 are best translated as passive constructions (“cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them” [NRSV]), not describing resistance by a specific group but perhaps serving as symbols of the past experiences of siege, defeat, and deportation that Ezekiel and his fellow exiles had experienced in the capture of Jerusalem in 597 B.C., as well as signs of what the people who remained in the land of Judah would eventually experience by Yahweh’s judgment in the final destruction of Jerusalem to come in 586 B.C. (see also Odell 2005, 57). Thus, in order to begin the public presentation of Yahweh’s message to the people, the divine voice speaks again out of the visionary context and instructs Ezekiel himself to symbolize the trauma that the people of Judah will endure as they are transformed into prisoners of war and deportees of a foreign empire.

The only clear active statement in Yahweh’s instructions in vv 25-26 is the statement that Yahweh will render Ezekiel unable to speak for a time (v 26). The Hebrew verb is causative and first person: **I will cause your tongue to cling to the roof of your mouth**. The difficulty involved in reconciling this action with Yahweh’s preceding commission to warn the people reminds us that the book’s visionary experiences do not proceed in a simplistic, linear sequence. Here the text revisits the theme introduced in Yahweh’s instructions in 3:4-11 and symbolized in Ezekiel’s seven days of silence in v 15, namely, that Ezekiel’s messages will be Yahweh’s own words, since Ezekiel will speak only when Yahweh has enabled him to do so. In v 27, Yahweh asserts that

whatever messages Ezekiel eventually speaks will come at Yahweh's initiative: **But when I speak to you, I will open your mouth.**

With the prophet rendered silent and engaged in the initial symbolic action representing trauma, siege, and exile, Ezekiel's commissioning vision of Yahweh's presence ends by reiterating that Ezekiel is to discharge his calling faithfully regardless of the people's response (see 2:5-7; 3:16-21). As if to provide a "final verbal punctuation mark" (Block 1997, 78) on the book's opening vision, v 27 reasserts the book's most characteristic description of the people of Judah: **they are a rebellious house** (*bêt mēi*).

FROM THE TEXT

Interpreters throughout the history of Christianity have often characterized the commissioning vision of chs 1–3 as being full of obscurity and difficulty. Yet, as one recent commentator remarks, the book's opening vision is theology in the form of artistic representation (Odell 2005, 32). The divine encounter that we witness at the outset of this book is, at many points, not a narrative, discursive report but a visual, sensory experience that captures our imaginations and engages a number of our senses. More importantly, this vision has particular power to speak to those who find themselves living in exile and struggling to deal with the traumatic experiences of displacement and subjugation.

For Ezekiel and his sixth-century audience, the theological significance of this vision and its power to speak to those suffering the trauma of exile rests, in the first place, on its portrayal of *God's sovereignty over human life and, indeed, the whole cosmos*. The vision of supernatural creatures and a heavenly throne is a visual demonstration of God's authority and power. As noted in the introduction to this commentary, for the priestly theology out of which Ezekiel operates, God's holiness is chiefly defined as sovereignty. In the particular context of Ezekiel's commissioning, the vision and words of chs 1–3 reaffirm God's sovereignty to those in exile and show them how they ought to envision their God. In the face of Babylonia's seeming dominance over the people's lives and world, the "first word" of the book of Ezekiel is a proclamation and demonstration that their God remains enthroned above the cosmos, with creatures of every kind subsumed under his authority.

Such a portrayal of God is a subversive image to any human persons, governments, or forces that claim dominion and power over the lives and bodies of God's people. For exiles in Ezekiel's time, the portrayals of chs 1–3 asserted an image of God as king in the face of a Babylonian emperor who demanded unquestionable loyalty. For contemporary readers, the vision and words of chs 1–3 undercut all forces that demand our loyalty or even tacitly

enfold us into their mind-sets—forces of economic systems, political ideologies, and individual or corporate claims to power. Some modern readers may rightly find difficulty with Ezekiel’s use of kingly/monarchical imagery for God, due to its masculine and hierarchical characteristics. However, in any context of exile and defeat, or even accommodation and assimilation, this image of God’s sovereignty serves as a powerful means to “relativize” all competing claims to dominion and reorient the lives of those whose vision has been clouded by such false sovereigns (Odell 2005, 37).

A second way that the vision in chs 1—3 responds to the context of exile and trauma is through its assertion of *God’s presence with the people in the midst of exile*. Immediately after an opening that describes the location of Ezekiel and his audience in a foreign, unclean land, far removed from the center of God’s holiness in the temple of their homeland (see 1:1-3), the book’s opening vision portrays God’s presence (*kābôd*, “glory”) appearing to Ezekiel in the midst of that foreign land. Though the book ultimately lifts up the ideal of a restored land and temple in which God’s presence can dwell in the midst of a cleansed community (see chs 40—48), God comes to the place of the people’s exile in order to begin the divine work that will ultimately lead to their full restoration. Thus, Ezekiel’s commissioning vision in chs 1—3 begins the process of offering a new interpretation of the destruction and exile suffered at the hands of the Babylonians, a process that will continue throughout the book’s visions, acts, and oracles. The first three chapters introduce the interpretive framework through which the exiles are to understand their past, present, and future. Rather than allowing the people to think that their plight is the result of historical contingencies or divine failure and/or cruelty, the book sets out to provide an explanation that incorporates the people’s trauma into the narrative plot line of their life as God’s people, as well as God’s overarching plan to restore his people and land. These portrayals begin from the declaration that God’s presence remains active with the people in the midst of their circumstances, whether good or bad.

As with other call experiences presented in Scripture (e.g., Exod 3; Jer 1), Ezekiel’s inaugural vision in chs 1—3 offers some significant portrayals of the *nature and task of those called to be God’s commissioned servants* (see sidebar “Ezekiel and the Call Experience” above). Although Ezekiel has a solitary encounter with God, the prominent use of other biblical and extrabiblical traditions, genres, and motifs in this vision demonstrates that Ezekiel came to perceive and articulate his call only in the context of his tradition and the experience of his community. Against that backdrop, Ezekiel’s commissioning to be God’s messenger is, in fact, only a new adaptation of his previous vocation. With his exile to Babylonia in 597 B.C., Ezekiel lost the ability to fulfill

his original calling to serve as a priest at the temple in Jerusalem and minister to his people in the context of their relationship with God. The divine appearance to Ezekiel in chs 1—3, however, maintains his identity as a priest, yet offers a creative adaptation of the ways in which Ezekiel can fulfill his service to God and people (Sweeney 2005, 137). As it is presented in Ezekiel, there is a dynamic nature to God's commissioning, which may take on new forms in response to new situations in the life of the people of God and may become clear only in the context of tradition and community experience.

Even more central to Ezekiel's commissioning vision, however, is an emphasis on the weightiness of God's call. God's words to the prophet in chs 2—3 especially make it clear that a call to serve as God's messenger demands total obedience on the part of the one called. Ezekiel hears God repeatedly tell him what he must do and say, communicating both explicitly and implicitly that living out God's call demands an obedience that stands in marked contrast to the attitude of the prophet's own people: "But you, son of man, listen to what I say to you. Do not rebel like that rebellious house" (2:8). Even so, God's words in passages like 3:16-21 (see also 2:5; 3:11) make it clear that Ezekiel's obedient discharge of his call does not depend upon whether the people respond positively to his message. His life depends upon his obedient fulfillment of the call (e.g., 3:18-19), yet such obedience is not measured by the level of success he achieves but by his faithfulness to the task. If Ezekiel fails to proclaim God's message, and the people continue to rebel against God, refusing to see their experiences and lives within God's unfolding plot line, then Ezekiel will be held accountable (3:20-21). But if the people remain rebellious despite Ezekiel's faithful proclamation of God's word to them, he "will have saved" himself (3:21).

For contemporary Christians, God's words to Ezekiel may provide a new way to envision the charge to share one's faith. In the spirit of Ezekiel, perhaps the ultimate responsibility of Christians is to bear faithful witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ, without always aiming to achieve simple, measurable conversions in people's lives. As the book of Ezekiel testifies, the "conversion" of persons to new ways of understanding and living is often a process that unfolds in dynamic ways, over periods of time, and through diverse experiences. At its heart, however, is frequently one who speaks God's words in faithful obedience.